

Isabella Torres

Professor Donohoe

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## Interpreting Classical Music According to Schleiermacher and Gadamer

Anyone who plays an instrument can tell you that reading classical music can often feel as complicated as struggling through a dense philosophical reading. Trying to play a classical piece with the correct attitude, tempo, and dynamics can be difficult let alone paying attention to crescendos, trills, and other notations in the piece. It is especially frustrating when you think you have performed a piece as it should be played only to have someone point out that the performance was not good enough since you did not play it with the right “attitude” or lacked the correct “touch”. In their mind, the composer’s notations should be strictly followed anytime someone sits down to play a piece of music. But, is that the right approach to have towards classical music? Should the interpretation of music be confined to composer’s notations alone? Or, is it possible for music to have a voice outside of what the composer has indicated? This question is one that is debated within the field of Hermeneutics with regards to texts. The study of Hermeneutics is concerned with how we approach texts in order to understand them. While there are several hermeneutical methods, I want to focus on the methods developed by Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher and Hans-

Georg Gadamer. In this paper, I will be making an argument for how Gadamer's hermeneutical method could be applied to interpreting and playing classical piano pieces. By explaining traditional methods of approaching piano pieces, the reader will see how similar this is to Schleiermacher's own way of approaching a text. For both traditions, the author (or composer) is elevated over the writing (or piece). In contrast, Gadamer's method places primal significance on the text instead of the author. Applying Gadamer's method to classical piano pieces, pianists would allow the piece to "speak to them" instead of only strictly following the dynamic symbols.

Before I dive in, I would like to provide a clarification. When it comes to interpreting a classical piece, I think a pianist should be allowed to play it how s/he feels *so long as* s/he is able to first play the piece how the composer instructed. Furthermore, it is wildly important that any interpretation is backed up with evidence from the classical piece itself. Throughout my paper, I will expand on these points and show how they tie together.

When I was eleven, Grace, my older sister, started teaching me how to play the piano. In spite of her best efforts, I found it to be tedious and boring and I proved to be the worst (and only) student she ever had. But, that all changed after I learned "Für Elise". By that point, I had switched to a "real" teacher and, while I still did not have a burning passion for the piano, I tolerated it a smidgen more than I initially had. Something sparked, though,

once I realized I could play "Für Elise". It was not so much about "Für Elise" but the fact that I could play something that people recognized. I felt like a real pianist and as if I "had arrived". Over time, I learned how to play more technical pieces which took significantly longer to learn than anything I had played before. The reason was because composers like Debussy and Beethoven left such detailed instructions for how to play "Deux Arabesque", "Clare de Lune" and the "Moonlight Sonata" that it took several months and hours of practice to really uncover how to correctly capture the mood of each piece. Part of the reason why it took so long was because the composer had left detailed markings for each piece that were complex and took time to understand and play smoothly. However, another reason why it took so long was because I had an idea of how to play each piece that often collided with how the composer noted it should be played. For example, I used to start "Deux Arabesque" with a lot of emotion letting the music swell until I reached the end of the second line which I felt like was the pivotal part on that page. The music did not indicate that it should be played that way; rather, I found myself instinctively starting it that way. But, when I showed up to my lesson, my teacher suggested that I needed to play that part differently. The beginning, he said, was supposed to sound simple and not emotional like I had previously been playing it. It was supposed to be played without any distinct emotions being felt through the music, without my prejudices coloring the notes. Granted, he was not wrong to correct me (for Pete's sake, he was my teacher!); and, as it turned out, the piece sounded a

lot better when I played it how he suggested. But, I think that my example raises an important question. Is it possible to play a classical piece of music devoid of any prejudices? Granted, it would be misguided to play a piece completely without regard for how the composer intended it to be played and simply following one's own inclinations. But, does that mean that it is always wrong to approach a classical piece with one's prejudices? I think it is fair to assert that the traditional way of interpreting classical piano music is to stick with what the composer has indicated. Furthermore, we should do our best to reconstruct and play each piece as indicated and intended by the composer. While that is certainly a valid way for someone to approach music, I do not think it is the best since it does not include being open to the music itself. Gadamer and Schleiermacher answer how to approach texts differently and we will explore their answers in the following paragraphs with traditional methods of playing classical pieces agreeing more with Schleiermacher's hermeneutical method.

For Schleiermacher, similar to most traditional ways of interpreting classical music, the author is more important than the text. To be more specific, when we are trying to understand what a text is saying, it is important for us to understand what the author intended, the time period that s/he wrote in, and the intended audience. In his own words, regarding the task of interpreting texts, he says, "The task is to be formulated as follows: "To understand the text at first as well as and then even better than its author." Since we have no direct knowledge of what was in the author's

mind, we must try to become aware of many things of which he himself may have been unconscious, except insofar as he reflects on his own work and becomes his own reader.” If someone wishes to correctly interpret a text, then they ought to put themselves in the mindset of the writer so that they can grasp what s/he was attempting to communicate. But, they must also go beyond what is explicitly stated in the text to extract what the text holds that the author may not have been aware that s/he was intending. Granted, this is a very difficult thing to do; and, Schleiermacher recognizes this by acknowledging this task as being infinite. Despite being infinite, though, Schleiermacher says we can begin the process by “putting ourselves” in the historical context in which the author wrote.

Also, important to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics is to see how the author viewed language. With regards to language, he talks about how we need to understand statements “in [its] relation to language as a whole and the knowledge it contains because of that.” But, we should also recognize how a statement will affect language in the future. These formulas of interpretation are referred to as “Objective-Historical” and “Objective-Prophetic”; respectively. Where-as, the “Subjective-Historical” and “Subjective-Prophetic” deals with how a statement “in the person’s mind, has emerged” and how it will continue to influence the author. Basically, in order to correctly interpret a writing, one must understand that the time period that the author was living in colored what language meant to her/him and that we cannot remove a writing from its historical context if we truly

want to understand it. We must understand language as a whole taking into account the time period in which a text was written. Schleiermacher also points out how we need to guard against errors. Whether it is because our misunderstanding snowballs or because our knowledge of the text is inaccurate, he says we need to be on guard of misreading what the author means. In his own words, "By drawing on our general survey of the work, interpretation may continue smoothly for some time without actually being artless, because everything is held together in a general picture. But as soon as some detail causes us difficulty, we begin to wonder whether the problem lies with the author or with us." We need to allow ourselves to be brought up short by the text in order to understand what is being communicated by the text. And, when we are brought up short, we ought to think back to the historical context, the author's intent, and the way the language was used at the time. All those individual parts make up a whole which allows us to have a holistic view of the text.

Similar to Schleiermacher, traditional ways of interpreting classical music puts the primal importance on the composer. When I sat down to learn a classical piece, I was always given a mini history lesson on the composer and time period that the piece was written in. It was important to understand the historical context since it affected how much emotion went into the piece. You wouldn't play the baroque piece with the sense of almost-spiritual like mood that you would play an impressionist piece. As I attended lessons, my teacher and I would spend hours examining the piece

in order to make sure we understood its makeup and each of the notations. While for fun, I would play the piece at any tempo or loudness that I wanted, I had to pull myself short when I attempted to play it as noted. It would have been disrespectful and arrogant to change how the composer intended the piece to be played. I needed to put myself into the mindset of the composer to capture the essence of the music. Learning “Clare de Lune” meant understanding what “Clare de Lune” meant; in addition, it meant knowing that Debussy liked to compose his music in sections that often feel disjointed in order to give it an impressionistic sort of feel. Approaching “Für Elise” without being aware that Ludwig van Beethoven composed it and what he intended to communicate through it, one would struggle, according to Schleiermacher, to properly interpret the music since one would be missing the most important part- the author.

But, if the correct way to interpret music means putting oneself into the context that the composer wrote the music in, how far must one go? If a piece was written for a harpsichord, does that mean that the pianist needs to find a harpsichord in order to correctly perform the piece? Is that far enough? Or, to play “Clare de Lune” correctly, does one need to play it on the same piano at which Debussy composed it? Granted, I think that the majority of pianists would agree that this is a step too far. But, if someone approaches interpreting music in a similar way to Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, interpretation becomes a vicious circle that will not allow pianists to stop with simply paying attention to the notations. I would like to suggest that

interpreting classical music should look more like how Gadamer suggests we should approach a text- with openness.

Important to Gadamer's hermeneutics is his view on objectivity, the classics, and how the text is more important than the author. Gadamer wonders how we come to understanding. Beginning with objectivity, he says, "Our question [...] is how hermeneutics, once freed from the ontological obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, can do justice to the historicity of understanding." In his writing, Gadamer talks about how we need to free ourselves of the idea of objectivity to embrace subjectivity. In other words, when we are reading a text, he thinks we need to let go of the idea that there is only one interpretation for a text. According to Gadamer, there could be several subjective interpretations of a text. But, he writes, "All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by the imperceptible habits of thought, and must gaze "on the things themselves" (which in the case of the literary critic, are meaningful texts, which themselves are again concerned with objects)." What he means is that we should not approach the task of hermeneutics with the presupposition that there is objective Truth. He also says that we need to be aware of the how we "project" what we think the text means onto the text. To be on guard against that, he says is not something that we decide once but is rather "the first, last, and constant task" of interpreting a text. However, Gadamer does not think that all interpretations and subjective positions are equal. On this, he says, "A person who is trying to understand



is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not borne out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed “by the things” themselves, is the constant task of understanding.” Here, Gadamer is saying that people should read the text with openness in order to understand what it is saying. By openness, he means being on guard against projecting what we think a text means until it is “confirmed” by the text itself. He continues, “The only “objectivity” here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterizes the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out?” In other words, someone cannot claim that their interpretation of a text is correct if they cannot back it up with evidence from the text itself. Often, when we read a text, we will find ourselves pulled up short by it. Being pulled up short occurs when you realize that you have misunderstood the text based off what the text itself reveals. This is related to being open towards the text and rejecting projections of what the text means that are not supported from the text. Specifically, we are pulled up short when we realize that our understanding of the text does not align with what the text is revealing. Once we realize that, we have to backtrack and approach the text with a new mindset that is open and attentive to what the text is actually saying. The reason for being pulled up short could very well be because we use a specific word or phrase differently than it was used in the time the text was written. In order to overcome this confusion, Gadamer suggests that we need to be aware for

how the text could be using language differently than we currently do today. For example, the word “mouse” would have completely different meanings for someone living today versus someone living in the 1800s. Furthermore, “This openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the whole of our own meaning or ourselves in relation to it.” We cannot separate ourselves from our experiences in the world and how those experiences imbue our lives and the words we use with meaning; but, we need to be aware of how our prejudices can cause us to misread a text and miss what it is communicating.

With regards to classics and how the text is more important than the author, Gadamer says that we need to be aware of two things. One, we need to exclude against interpretations that are not consistent with what the text itself says and what tradition says. Two, we also need to be aware that there are legitimate prejudices; specifically, prejudices stemming from authority. Gadamer explains, “If the prestige of authority displaces one’s own judgement, then authority is in fact a source of prejudices. But this does not preclude its being a source of truth, and that is what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated authority.” For Gadamer, even though the text is more important than the author, he realizes that we often allow prejudices to affect how we interpret a piece. Prejudices, according to Gadamer, “constitute the historical reality of [someone’s] being”; but, he says that someone’s historical reality should not be ignored because it is what s/he brings to the text. Someone cannot remove themselves from their

historical context and distance themselves from their historically shaped prejudices when interpreting a text. However, while recognizing that, Gadamer asserts that some prejudices are more legitimate than others. He thinks of authority itself as being a legitimate prejudice. However, in order for an authority to be *recognized* as an authority, it must be saying something about the text that can be proved from within the text. If an authority is making a claim about a text that cannot be backed up, then it is not legitimate and should not be regarded as one. With regards to classics, Gadamer says that classics become so because they are ever present in history. More specifically, he writes, “when we call something classical, there is a consciousness of something enduring, of significance that cannot be lost and that is independent of all the circumstances of time—a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.” Classics, even if they are written (or composed) before our time deserve their title because of their ability to still speak to us. Unlike with Schleiermacher, we do not need to try to reconstruct the past and try to know everything about the author in order to interpret a text. In order to correctly interpret a text, we need to approach it with openness to see what it has to say. We need to allow the text to speak to us. We need to understand what was important to begin with- the text.

Applying Gadamer’s hermeneutics to classical pieces, we have a very different way of approaching music. When I sit down to play a piece, it would mean being intentional to interpret what the music itself is, in a sense,

“saying”. However, I am not saying that everyone’s interpretation of music would be equally correct. Like Gadamer says, not all subjective views are equal. I am not saying that the next time I attend my piano lesson that it would be appropriate or correct for me to inform my teacher that I will, from now on, be playing each classical piece as I see fit. First, I would fail to remember that my teacher has much more experience interpreting piano pieces and as such is most likely a legitimate authority. Second, in order for any interpretation to be correct (whether it is my teacher’s or my own), it must be supported by the text, or in this case, the music itself. When I wanted to play “Deux Arabesque” with a lot of emotion in the first line, I should have backed up why I felt that it was the correct way to interpret the piece. However, if it was only because I “felt like it”, that would not have been a good reason. While I do not have to agree with my teacher about all of his interpretations, I still need to be able to show why I interpret the piece the way I do drawing from the piece itself. Just because my teacher is an authority does not mean that I must forgo my own freedom to interpret music. Furthermore, I would still be capable of presenting valid reasons for why I would interpret differently than he does. Anytime we play a classical piece, if we are going to challenge the traditional way of playing it, we need to provide our reasons from the piece itself.

Finally, because I am speaking about classical pieces, I think it is very important for pianists to first learn these pieces how they are notated by the composer. While a pianist might disagree with how the composer wished for

a piece to be played, out of respect for tradition which has been passed down, s/he should learn it as directed. After s/he can play it as notated, s/he should have the freedom to play classical pieces how s/he feels it speaks to him/her so long as it stays true to the piece itself. There are two main reasons that I see why this is important to play classical pieces as notated. First, just because someone might initially disagree with how a composer has notated a piece does not mean that their notation is actually incorrect. For instance, when I first started playing "Clare de Lune", I thought it seemed odd to play the second page of "Clare de Lune" softly instead of loudly. But, after playing through it several times, I could see why Debussy notated that should be played that way and I now agree with him. The second page should be played softly until you reach the second to last line because it allows you to fully appreciate the song's transition between theme A and B. Second, I think playing pieces as notated guards against arrogance and fosters a charitable view towards classical composers. In philosophy, we often talk about how important it is to interpret texts with a charitable attitude in order to best understand the philosopher's argument. I think the same mindset should be used in regards to composers. It would be arrogant to look at "Für Elise" and say Beethoven's notations are rubbish. Being charitable and humble when interpreting music means approaching pieces with the desire to understand why the composer noted the music the way s/he did. Pianists should learn how to play classical pieces as noted out of respect for the composers' authorities. However, after approaching a piece

with a charitable attitude and an openness to understand, a pianist should then be allowed to play classical pieces as they feel best interprets the piece- by supporting their interpretation from the piece itself.

Works Cited

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